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# The future of information architecture: conceiving a better way to understand taxonomy, network and intelligence

Peter Baofu

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Information Architecture (IA) has been a well established sub-discipline of the information, computer and library sciences since the late 1990s. Recent contributions from Gilchrist (2004), Batley (2007a), but particularly Morville and Rosenfeld's (2007) seminal work (originally published in 1998), have thoroughly delineated the core principles of IA. Although minor differences will always be found between IA definitions depending on which you hold dearest, most emphasise the role of user centred design, navigation tools (e.g. taxonomies, information retrieval thesauri, etc.), indexing and metadata in delivering information and making it discoverable by users on the Web (Batley, 2007b). Although incorporating 'Information Architecture' in its title, *The Future of Information Architecture* by Peter Baofu is peculiar in that it does not cover these themes; at least, not explicitly.

*The Future of Information Architecture* is a philosophical excursion into the issues which pervade current approaches to information processing, storage, use and dissemination. This excursion - which the author labels as his "synthetic theory of information architecture" - suggests that taxonomies and networks, when analysed from the perspectives of mind, nature, society and culture, suffer from several contradictions. In particular, Baofu's analysis suggests that they suffer from a series of inherent tensions which he summarises in his six principles: simpleness-complicadeness, exactness-vagueness, slowness-quickness, order-chaos, symmetry-asymmetry, and the post human stage. To derive these principles and aid his philosophical exposition, Baofu uses the ideas and logic of existential dialectics. So, for example, where a taxonomy (in its various permutations) may deliver specificity, it will simultaneously deliver vagueness because the more precise a taxonomy becomes the less conducive it is to the addition of new concepts (i.e. exactness-vagueness principle). Similarly the reverse is true; a taxonomy which is less exact (i.e. vague) and which is consequently more conducive to the addition of new concepts will immediately fail to deliver accuracy and exactness. Baofu therefore teases out the various ambiguities of how information is organised and communicated; but he stops short of providing alternatives and instead notes the inevitable logic of existential dialectics as pervading our information future.

Baofu assembles all manner of examples (many of them included in the tables) which help to demonstrate the validity of his six principles. These examples tend to be interesting owing to their heterogeneity, which not only adds further gravitas to Baofu's arguments, but also aids the reader in comprehending some complex ideas. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how innovative Baofu's thesis actually is. Some of the ideas presented are not particularly new. For example, those active in Knowledge Organisation System (KOS) construction are well versed in the principles of simpleness-

complicadness, exactness-vagueness, and slowness-quickness, although they might not label them as such. Balancing these principles is an integral part of KOS construction and is inextricably linked to document indexing and the implications this has for precision and recall in information retrieval. Readers are likely to spot other instances of déjà vu. It is therefore possible that reader interest in *The Future of Information Architecture* is aroused more by the novelty of having such ideas assembled together with good examples, rather than the ideas themselves.

Baofu is prolific writer, having authored 16 books between 2007 and 2009 alone (Baofu, 2009). He has published extensively on futurist ideas and political science and has a distinguished academic career, most recently as a visiting Professor of Political Science at Eastern New Mexico University. It is perhaps for this reason that Baofu's definition of IA differs from those prevailing in the library, information and computer sciences literature. For Baofu, 'information architecture' (as distinct from Information Architecture (IA)) is primarily concerned with taxonomies and networks of all types and has little to do with IA as it has been defined by the likes of Morville and Rosenfeld (2007). As Baofu states, "The taxonomic schemes for information classification [...] constitute only one main aspect of information architecture. The other concerns information network" (p.129). Indeed, *The Future of Information Architecture* spends only a small amount of space discussing the taxonomies and KOSs normally associated with the IA we are familiar with (e.g. Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDC), Library of Congress Classification (LCC), etc.); instead more space is dedicated to the use of taxonomies and networks generally. Whilst no one can claim ownership over language or its semantics, there is a sense in which Baofu has misappropriated 'information architecture'. IA is a well defined topic and one to which he refers in his prose, albeit briefly; yet, Baofu never attempts to distinguish between our IA and his 'information architecture'. This confusion is made all the more palpable since Chandos Publishing - an eminent LIS publisher and one which has published books on IA in the past - has actually published *The Future of Information Architecture*.

Unfortunately, there are issues other than semantics which detract from the book. Whilst the book is well referenced, 47 of the references are Wikipedia articles which appear to be cited and quoted more than any other source used. This is a controversial decision on the part of Baofu, particularly given the transitory nature of such articles and their dubious provenance. In his acknowledgements Baofu states, "This book, like all other previous ones of mine, is written to challenge conventional ideas and values, both past and present" (p. xv). His personal homepage also lists his publications under the heading: "My Original Books to Challenge the Very Foundation of Most Cherished Human Ideas/Values" (Baofu, 2009). One consequently assumes that the use of Wikipedia is an attempt to confront our cherished ideas of academic rigour and integrity. Wikipedia is a source which most undergraduates (and some school children) are forbidden from using. It is therefore perplexing to discover an author so willing to jettison academic rigour; to challenge cherished ideas and values by actually debasing the tools by which academics normally challenge ideas and values.

Of course, Baofu would rebuff this criticism. It is his *raison d'être* to challenge commonly held opinions; but one wonders what true research has actually gone into chapters where close to 50% of its content comprises direct quotes from a source of such dubiety. And this causes problems. Some of Baofu's statements and subsequent analyses (based on information from Wikipedia) are simply misleading or inaccurate. For example, Baofu informs us (by quoting from Wikipedia) that "DDC is less hospitable to the addition of new subjects, as opposed to [the] Library of Congress Classification which has 21 classes at the top level" and that "DDC [...] is built on a top down approach to classify all human knowledge which makes it difficult to adapt to changing fields of knowledge" (p. 102). Accommodating new subjects is difficult in any KOS; yet the principal motivation behind a decimal based taxonomic classification is to accommodate an ever growing spread of subjects and to simplify the process through subdivision. Simply comparing the 10 top DDC classes with the 21 top LCC is a reductionist view and ignores the role of inheritance and inclusiveness in taxonomic hierarchies.

Regrettably, such instances immediately cast doubt, not only on the validity of some of the arguments being made, but whether the author has properly researched the topic about which he professes to know something.

The tables too – which are often the source of intrigue and interest – can also be the source of boredom and frustration thus, in a strange sense of irony, exemplifying their very own existential dialectic logic. Indeed, they often replicate information which Baofu has already provided within his prose such that the reader is frequently directed to a table containing the very same information which they have just read. This is a shame and detracts from what is otherwise a useful tool; but it is also something a good copy editor should have corrected or at least have advised on. Typographical errors are also frequent ('organizational learning' anyone?) therefore indicating that the editing of this volume was not what it should have been. *The Future of Information Architecture* also suffers from Baofu's writing style which, although couched in the normal philosophical terminology, is strangely narcissistic at times. It is common practice for academics to cite themselves; however, Baofu not only cites himself but continually reminds the reader of the books he has written in the past. This should have been cleaned up prior to publication.

*The Future of Information Architecture* can essentially be considered an extended philosophical essay, since although the volume is 283 pages long, 117 of these comprise tables of examples to aid Baofu's expositions. It is therefore a slim volume; but it can be an interesting one. Unfortunately, this interest is insufficiently persuasive when it comes to parting with one's cash, and the above criticisms make *The Future of Information Architecture* an unattractive acquisition. Ultimately, however, *The Future of Information Architecture* provides very little for those interested in emerging IA trends, and unfortunately these are the people who will be most likely to purchase it owing to its ambiguous title and publisher.

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